

# Rural Students' Pathways to Higher Tertiary Education in Zimbabwe: Overcoming Barriers, Promoting Inclusion and Success

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## EDITORIAL DATES

Received: 03 August 2024

Revised: 04 January 2025

Accepted: 06 January 2025

Published: 17 January 2025

## Copyright:

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Published by [ERRCD Forum](#).

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DOI: [10.38140/ijrcs-2024.vol7.1.02](https://doi.org/10.38140/ijrcs-2024.vol7.1.02)

**Abstract:** Accessing higher tertiary education for rural students in Zimbabwe is a complex journey shaped by various socio-economic, cultural, and geographic factors unique to their circumstances. This study examines the experiences of rural students in accessing, participating in, and attaining higher tertiary education through the lens of Freire's theory of critical consciousness. It employs a critical emancipatory research paradigm, utilising participatory action research methodologies. Twenty participants were purposively selected and actively involved as co-researchers throughout the research process to identify empowering practices that can transform their educational realities. Data was collected using focus group discussions and Photovoice, allowing participants to share narratives and visually represent the barriers in their educational journeys. Critical discourse analysis revealed various factors that shape educational trajectories, such as geographic isolation, financial constraints, a lack of collegiate guidance, and the internalisation of negative perceptions about rural identities. Findings also highlighted protective factors, including strong family and community support systems, self-determined mindsets, and engagement with college-bridging programmes. Through

critical dialogues, participants explored ways to challenge internalised stigmas and develop critical literacies to navigate systemic barriers. The PAR process enhanced participants' critical consciousness and enabled them to collectively generate rural student-led solutions for equitable educational access. The importance of adopting strengths-based and culturally sustaining approaches that amplify the voices of rural students in transforming policies and practices was highlighted. Importantly, this study demonstrated the emancipatory potential of PAR in fostering resilience and self-advocacy among rural students, thereby promoting higher tertiary education as a means for social and economic mobility.

**Keywords:** Critical consciousness, higher tertiary education, participatory action research, rural student, resilience.

## 1. Introduction

Zimbabwe has many rural communities, with a large portion of its population living in remote areas that often have fewer resources. The pursuit of higher education among rural poor students is increasingly hindered by financial constraints, creating a significant bottleneck in their academic and career advancement (Dekeza & Kufakunesu, 2017). Despite their desire and potential for academic success, Dube and Moyo (2023) state that these students often face substantial challenges in affording tuition fees, learning materials, and living expenses associated with attending universities or colleges. The economic disparities between urban and rural areas exacerbate these difficulties, with limited access to financial aid and scholarships tailored to their unique circumstances widening the gap in educational attainment. As a result, Nenji and Ndofirepi (2020) found that many promising rural students are compelled to abandon their academic aspirations, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and limiting opportunities for socio-economic mobility within these communities. It is imperative for stakeholders, including the government and non-governmental organisations, to implement targeted interventions aimed at providing financial support and resource accessibility to empower these students to realise their educational goals.

### How to cite this article:

Chidakwa, N. (2025). Rural students' pathways to higher tertiary education in Zimbabwe: Overcoming barriers, promoting inclusion and success. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Rural and Community Studies*, 7(1), a02. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijrcs-2024.vol7.1.02>

Furthermore, the intersection of socio-cultural, economic, and geographical factors in these rural communities has created a distinct educational landscape that influences the educational pathways of students (Dekeza & Kufakunesu, 2017; Nhundu, 2015; Sibanda & Young, 2020; Tarusikirwa & Mafa, 2017). During the colonial era, education in Zimbabwe was primarily designed to serve the interests of the colonial administration and the white minority population (Dube & Moyo, 2023). According to Maravanyika (1990), the colonial neglect of rural education in Zimbabwe has led to persistent educational disparities, limited access to opportunities, underdevelopment in rural areas, social and political marginalisation, and inter-generational impacts, all of which hinder the quality of education. Since 1980, access to quality education in Zimbabwean rural communities has improved, but it remains limited due to a lack of resources and investment (Dekeza & Kufakunesu, 2017). This lack of investment in rural education perpetuates poverty and inequality, as rural students face barriers to higher tertiary education and job market competition (Gomba, 2017; Sibanda & Young, 2020). The legacy of inadequate rural education continues to perpetuate cycles of poverty and disadvantage across generations, necessitating a more inclusive future for all Zimbabweans.

Furthermore, rural communities have faced significant barriers, including limited access to quality education, underinvestment in teacher training and development, and persistent socio-economic disparities (Chikwanha, 2016). Shava (2021) notes that even though there are qualified teachers available, the government's lack of financial resources prevents it from hiring enough qualified teachers in schools. This shortage affects the quality of education that the government aims to provide, particularly in rural communities. These issues have led to poor learning environments, high student-teacher ratios, and substandard educational outcomes. The barriers in rural communities have a direct impact on educational outcomes, with lower achievement levels, high dropout rates, and limited progression to higher tertiary education (Nenji & Ndofirepi, 2020). These barriers also hinder opportunities for rural development, as education is a critical driver of rural development and economic growth. Zimbabwe needs sustained investment, policy reform, and targeted interventions to improve the progression of rural students to higher tertiary education. Without meaningful efforts to enhance educational equity and quality, Zimbabwe risks perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality, undermining national development and social progress.

Improving access to quality education in rural areas remains a critical priority for achieving educational equity and sustainable development in Zimbabwe. Following independence in 1980, the Zimbabwean government prioritised education as a means of national development and social progress (Gomba, 2017; Zvobgo, 1981). Dube and Moyo (2023) argue that efforts have been made to expand access to education, particularly in rural communities. The government has introduced policies aimed at decentralising education management and increasing community participation in school governance. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international donors have also been involved in supporting rural education initiatives, providing resources, training, and capacity-building programmes for teachers and school administrators (Dekeza & Kufakunesu, 2017; Nenji & Ndofirepi, 2020; Nera & Nyikadzino, 2023). Despite Zimbabwe's efforts to expand educational access, significant gaps persist in policy implementation and resource distribution, particularly in rural areas. Systemic barriers, including inadequate infrastructure and socio-economic disparities, continue to hinder equitable access to higher education (Bhurekeni, 2020; Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2024; Dube & Moyo, 2023). This study critically examines these challenges by exploring the lived experiences of rural students and their pathways to higher education. It investigates the complex interplay of factors—such as family dynamics, community support, and the role of local institutions—that influence their educational aspirations and outcomes. The study aims to illuminate the systemic reforms needed to break down barriers, foster inclusion, and promote success for rural students pursuing higher education in Zimbabwe by addressing these multifaceted influences.

## **1.1 Problem statement**

The barriers faced by Zimbabwe's rural students in accessing higher tertiary education stem from a complex interplay of historical, socioeconomic, and institutional challenges that perpetuate systemic educational inequality (Nenji & Ndofirepi, 2020). Prior to independence, Dube and Moyo (2023) state that rural communities face various barriers due to numerous factors related to the financial issues of the current government. These barriers have ultimately enhanced intergenerational cycles of poverty by lowering academic achievement, increasing dropout rates, and limiting access to higher tertiary education. Critical gaps in the implementation of policies and resource allocation remain despite post-independence efforts to increase educational access. These gaps not only limit the ability of individual students but also impede national economic growth and broader rural development. This study critically evaluates the various constraints preventing educational opportunities and seeks transformative solutions to support equitable access to higher tertiary education in Zimbabwe by examining the lived experiences of rural students. It also offers insights that can propel positive change and empower the next generation of rural students to excel in attaining higher tertiary education. This is:

- How do historical, socioeconomic, and institutional barriers create a paradox that hinders rural students' access to higher education in Zimbabwe?

## **2. Literature Review**

Access to higher tertiary education in Zimbabwe remains a significant challenge for rural students, despite various efforts to bridge the educational divide. Socio-cultural activities and practices within rural contexts heavily influence students' career and educational choices, limiting their chances of exploring and engaging with various fields and options (Nenji & Ndofirepi, 2020). According to Dube and Moyo (2023), socio-cultural activities and practices are shaped by community context, reflecting values, beliefs, norms, and social structures that form the identity and cohesion of a group. The more established livelihoods of rural communities are subject to cultural norms and basic tenets that regard novelty as alarming due to its unfamiliarity (Mlambo-Ngcuka & Mavuso, 2018a; 2018b). It is important to note that these socio-cultural activities and practices are crucial for maintaining cultural identity, fostering community, transmitting values, and contributing to social cohesion and collective memory within a society. For example, due to cultural preservation, rural students may be less willing to attend school and pursue courses in technologies, engineering, or the sciences, which are becoming increasingly important in the global economy today (Nera & Nyikadzino, 2023). Thus, Wu and Yuan (2022) argue that students' pursuit of higher tertiary education is greatly impacted by socio-cultural norms and activities in China, particularly those from traditional or rural communities.

Furthermore, a study by Giovanis (2021) shows that socio-cultural activities and practices have a positive and negative impact on rural learners' goals, level of readiness, availability of resources, and general educational experiences. The study found that economic limitations, cultural norms, a lack of exposure to possibilities for higher education, cultural isolation, and language hurdles are some of the negative effects, while resilience, strong communities, cultural capital, and financial support from community-based scholarships are examples of positive effects commonly found in rural areas. This cultural disposition hampers students' dreams in both negative and positive ways when pursuing further education and job opportunities, resulting in low socio-economic mobility (Okeowhor et al., 2019; Xiang & Stillwell, 2023). Such a difference calls for enhanced culturally responsive policies, inclusive curricula, flexible learning models, community participation, financial assistance, infrastructure development, mentorship programmes, and role models, which can all help to achieve the goal of balancing socio-cultural practices and higher education, as proposed by Mayne (2020). Through comprehension and resolution of these elements, Betancur et al. (2023) and Shava (2021) suggest that interested parties can establish more welcoming and encouraging environments for every student. This means rural communities trapped by these socio-cultural factors need a

holistic approach that includes changes in education policy and funding for the improvement of educational facilities in rural areas to allow rural students to dream of and explore modern-day professions.

The rural students' career options and dreams are greatly affected by the gap between 'conventional occupations' and 'modern employment opportunities'. According to Betancur et al. (2023) and Okeowhor et al. (2019), the gap between conventional occupations and modern employment pertains to differences in skills requirements, income potential, job stability, work environment, and societal perceptions. Given the socio-economic situation in Zimbabwe, many people typically belong to small-scale societies whose major economic activities include farming, manual work, or local businesses that are essential to their daily lives. This disparity in exposure and opportunity poses a significant challenge for rural students aspiring to pursue higher education in fields beyond their traditional occupations (Cicchinelli & Beesley, 2017; Chikwanha, 2016; Madani, 2019). A study by Chen (2022) and Murwira (2019) shows that without adequate guidance and mentorship, rural students may lack awareness of alternative pathways and the requisite skills needed to thrive in modern industries. As a result, they may feel constrained by their circumstances and perceive higher education as inaccessible or irrelevant to their lives. This situation can reduce the number of opportunities rural students see as feasible, narrowing their vision of what they can do after high school. Since rural students are not exposed to many professional options, Cicchinelli and Beesley (2017) and Murwira (2019) suggest they may be unaware of other opportunities available to those with higher education. This is due to limited opportunities for association with career direction and guidance services that are essential to complement their formal education and diversify their views of the contemporary labour market (Chen, 2022; Ganss et al., 2023). This study calls for an analysis of specific measures to be implemented to broaden the horizons of rural students and direct their choices toward areas of expertise that align with the current requirements of the modern world market.

Geographic isolation makes it difficult for Zimbabwean rural students to attain tertiary education, mainly quality education because most of these institutions are located far from the areas where students from rural schools come from (Nenji & Ndofirepi, 2020). Bonilla-Mejía et al. (2024) define geographic isolation as the term used to describe how these communities are physically isolated from major cities and other densely populated areas due to factors such as distance, inadequate facilities, and natural barriers that limit their access to opportunities and resources in urban areas. This situation, coupled with poor transport networks, poses serious barriers for rural students in attaining quality education compared to their urban counterparts. As Brownie et al. (2023) posit, rural school educational isolation entails definitive restrictions on student learning in essential academic subjects and co-curricular activities that are central to their progression to higher tertiary education. This results in limited options for rural students and parents from rural communities, forcing them to compromise and opt for even a below-average education for their child or abandon the idea of pursuing further education altogether. Such geographic barriers not only reduce the quality of education but can lead to a vicious cycle of poverty since rural students are denied equal opportunities compared to their urban counterparts (Mgqwashu et al., 2020; Trahar et al., 2020). In this context, a study by Nenji and Ndofirepi (2020) proposes an increase in transport networks, the establishment of more local colleges and universities, and the need to bring more educational facilities closer to those in rural areas. These measures are crucial, particularly with a view to creating fair conditions for the materialisation of the right to higher tertiary education across all areas.

Hungwe (2020) and Nenji and Ndofirepi (2020) pointed out that there are significant differences in the physical quantity and quality of schools and teachers between rural and urban areas that impact the delivery of quality education in rural communities. Schools in rural areas are characterised by limited access to important resources like libraries, laboratories, and other recreational activities and academic programmes, which reduces equal educational opportunities (Betancur et al., 2024). This

ultimately makes the environment in which rural schools operate less resourceful than that of their urban counterparts, thus hindering the academic and individual growth of rural students. Similarly, Dekeza and Kufakunesu (2017) point out that one of the major barriers rural communities experience is the ability to attract and retain adequately trained personnel in the education sector, particularly Science and Mathematics teachers. The issues of poor transport and network systems, lack of opportunities for professional development, and geographical isolation cause professionals to leave rural schools, which directly impacts the quality of education and the experience of rural students (Wu & Yuan, 2022).

Furthermore, the costs likely to be incurred when rural students move to urban areas in pursuit of higher education can also be considered a hurdle for them, making issues of inequality in access to higher education a reality (Wu & Yuan, 2022). Walker and Mathebula (2019) posit that the costs of securing reasonable accommodation, as well as tuition fees and living expenses, are very high. Since most tertiary institutions are located in urban areas, research has established that the cost of living in urban areas is relatively higher than in rural areas, with aspects of housing, food, and transport creating increased difficulties for students (Talbert et al., 2020). These expenses are beyond the reach of many rural students, most of whom come from poor backgrounds. This sort of socio-economic pressure eliminates the motivation for many talented rural students to enhance their education beyond a basic level, thus keeping educational standards and economic mobility low in rural communities. As most families in rural areas, on average, have low income levels and limited funds to enable their children to attend colleges or universities, this hinders the enrolment rate of rural students in higher education (Francis & Webster, 2019). Although some scholarships and financial aid are available, they do not fully cover the cost of tuition alone, let alone account for other living expenses for students (Betancur et al., 2023; Walker & Mathebula, 2019). Therefore, given these economic constraints, rural students' ability to seek more enriched colleges and universities means that educational achievement gaps between rural and urban areas are likely to persist.

### **3. Theoretical Framework: Freire's Theory of Critical Consciousness**

The conceptual framework for this study draws from Freire's theory of critical consciousness (CC) and indicates a purposeful effort to comprehend rural high school students' educational experiences from the perspectives of empowerment and social change (Magee & Pherali, 2019; Rapa & Geldhof, 2020). According to Freire, education has the power to transform marginalised communities by encouraging critical thinking, consciousness-raising, and group action (Luter, Mitchell & Taylor, 2017). Using this concept, the research aimed to investigate how rural students cope with the institutional impediments and systemic injustices that prevent them from pursuing higher education. Additionally, Magee and Pherali (2017) emphasise that Freire's focus on problem-posing pedagogy and dialogical education aligns well with the research's participatory approach, in which rural students actively participated as co-researchers. Freire's theory thus provides a solid conceptual framework for comprehending the dynamics of oppression and power in education, offering insightful information about fostering critical consciousness and social change among rural students.

Through the application of the CC framework, the study assisted rural students in identifying and analysing barriers to higher education and developing solutions. This aligns with research by Taylor et al. (2016), which indicates that the CC framework helps students to enhance their critical thinking abilities, resilience, self-efficacy, self-control, competencies, and sense of self. Additionally, the study highlighted the CC framework of community empowerment and collective action by underscoring the significance of community participation in addressing educational hurdles. This initiative sought to provide rural communities with a sense of agency and ownership in tackling educational issues by involving them in the problem-solving process. Crucially, the CC framework enabled students to devise solutions that were firmly rooted in their rural communities, ensuring that interventions were relevant to the local context and needs (Broadbent et al., 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ultimately, the

goal of the study was to better understand the experiences of rural students while also elevating their voices and supporting community-driven initiatives to improve educational access. The study's adoption of the CC framework provided a conceptual foundation for analysing the challenges faced by rural students and facilitated the development of practical solutions that engaged affected communities in addressing these challenges.

## **4. Methodology**

The study employed participatory action research (PAR) to address barriers limiting access to higher education in rural communities. Participants identified these barriers and shared their experiences, which were then examined in depth. Photovoice (PV) was used to document their insights. The final phase involved taking action by identifying and implementing strategies to overcome the barriers. Participants also engaged in critical reflection to evaluate the outcomes. The activities promoted mental health, social competence, and essential capacities, contributing to sustainable community development. A qualitative design was chosen for its ability to capture nuanced data and explore complex social contexts and power dynamics in educational settings (Pilcher & Cortazzi, 2024). This approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' voices and experiences, leading to a better understanding of the barriers to and opportunities for higher education in under-resourced rural communities.

The study utilised a qualitative approach as the mode of inquiry, valuing participants' perspectives throughout the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach facilitated collaboration aimed at enhancing resilience among rural students to attain tertiary education. Conducted in the participants' natural settings, the study generated relevant insights to inform actions addressing the real barriers faced by rural youth. Participants freely shared their opinions and proposed ways to implement a collaborative approach to strengthening resilience. Multiple data collection methods were employed, including focus group discussions (FGDs) and participatory video (PV), to capture data in its natural state. These methods enhanced the reliability and trustworthiness of the study by providing a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and insights (Pilcher & Cortazzi, 2024). The qualitative approach thus enabled an in-depth exploration of the issues while fostering solutions grounded in the lived realities of rural students.

### **4.1 Research setting**

This study looked at how societal disparities affect Zimbabwe's rural secondary schools in Chiredzi South District, where students' access to higher tertiary education has been restricted. The selected setting of the rural school offered a vital perspective for analysing how structural, socioeconomic, and cultural elements interact to shape students' educational paths. The study emphasised how critical it is to address structural inequalities and promote inclusive behaviours that strengthen underprivileged groups. The study's emphasis on under-represented situations helps to advance programmes that aim to improve pathways to higher tertiary education for underprivileged students and revolutionise rural education.

### **4.2 Participants**

The study involved participants from diverse backgrounds, selected based on their socio-economic experiences and community contexts. The participants were actively engaged as co-researchers, transforming them from research subjects into key knowledge producers. The principal investigator collaborated with 20 participants, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the social realities and contextual factors affecting them. Including individuals aged 18 and above ensured a mature understanding of the issues under investigation, enriching the study's insights (Pilcher & Cortazzi, 2024). The participants' anonymity was well guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms, which concealed their identities and ensured the confidentiality of their participation and data, rather than personal data essential for the study, as shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** *Participants demographic information*

<b>Pseudonym(s)</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Number</b>
RSP (1-20)	Rural Students Participants	Between 18 and 23	20

### **4.3 Data collection methods**

The study collected context-specific data through participatory techniques such as FGDs and Photovoice (PV). In FGDs, participants were able to critically examine systemic obstacles to education, explore shared experiences, and share personal narratives. Using PV, a participatory visual tool, participants captured their educational experiences on camera, leading to a deeper understanding of these experiences. These approaches were well-suited for examining intricate social and educational concerns in rural communities, as they gathered a variety of viewpoints and promoted active participation (Pilcher & Cortazzi, 2024).

### **4.4 Ethical considerations**

The University Research Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg granted ethical clearance for the project (SEM 2-2023-157), while the Zimbabwean Ministry of Local Governance provided authorisation for access to research locations. To select participants, a discussion gathering was organised to foster trust and ensure adherence to ethical standards. The study protected participants' names and well-being while emphasising student agency and empowerment. In accordance with institutional and community standards for ethical research practices, consent was obtained appropriately from both participants and local authorities.

### **4.5 Data analysis**

Data from the FGD and PV were analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA) in this study. The analysis was divided into three levels: discursive practices, which examined how participants produced and interpreted texts; textual analysis, which looked at how language reflected historical and socioeconomic factors influencing rural youths' access to higher tertiary education; and social practices, which considered broader societal influences such as gender, power, and culture (Pilcher & Cortazzi, 2024). CDA was selected because it supports social justice and educational equity and aligns with critical consciousness and community-engaged research.

## **5. Presentation of Results**

The results and discussion sections are structured to directly address the main research question by presenting findings aligned with the study's objectives. The identified themes respond to the sub-research questions, ensuring a coherent connection between the data and the focus of the inquiry. The researcher carefully analysed and categorised the data to maintain alignment between the themes and the research questions, avoiding deviation while offering in-depth insights. This approach ensures that the themes remain relevant, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and providing evidence-based answers to the research questions posed.

### **5.1 Theme 1: Navigating barriers to higher tertiary education for rural students**

Through FGD and PV, the study unveils various aspects of culture, economy, and accessibility of institutions of higher learning that limit the education of rural students. Concerning cultural values and traditions, the study revealed a strong influence on the students' beliefs and attitudes towards higher learning. Key factors identified included 'family beliefs', 'cultural and/or religious expectations', and 'paternal and/or maternal approaches to child-rearing', which were noted to promote gender differences and bias. RSP11 noted:

*"In our community, there's a strong emphasis on getting married early and starting a family, which sometimes clashes with the idea of pursuing higher tertiary education."*

It is therefore imperative that the multifaceted interplay between culture and education is well understood, especially when designing and implementing culturally appropriate prevention and promotion efforts. It has been confirmed that strategies that take into account and incorporate culture would help students better connect their learning objectives to those of the community, as articulated by RSP16, who said:

*"Yes, our elders may feel differently about us than we do, but we still need programmes that support us in following our aspirations and honour our traditions. Let's include our elders in every programme and ensure that they understand our emotions."*

Moreover, economic disparities emerged as a significant barrier to higher tertiary education for rural students. Findings show that 'limited financial resources', 'lack of infrastructure', and 'inadequate access to educational materials' were identified as economic barriers hindering rural students' ability to pursue advanced studies. Participants expressed frustrations with the financial burden associated with higher tertiary education, with RSP3 stating:

*"Even if we would like to attend university, the cost is frequently too expensive for us to pay; after all, our parents are only farmers and cannot afford to spend so much money."*

The fact that higher tertiary education is beyond the reach of many rural students whose parents are farmers with limited financial means is consistent with other socio-economic factors postulated in Zimbabwe. This situation clearly demonstrates that, due to a lack of finances, rural students are unable to attend college, perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Therefore, liberating rural people from a scarcity of financial resources requires a complex intervention that includes resource development, the construction of necessary facilities, and the provision of adequate financial assistance. RSP6 noted the importance of the government focusing on programmes that could alleviate monetary concerns and expand the sources of educational materials say:

*"We require more support services and scholarships that are directed towards the requirements of rural students and without favouritism in the selection process."*

*"Most students who are awarded scholarships tend to come from wealthier backgrounds, leaving those of us in need of assistance powerless. We are still determining the procedure." [RSP7]*

Based on the study, it is evident that there is a need for increased access, better scholarships, and supportive programmes to serve rural students in Zimbabwe. The participants' fears that scholarships are sometimes given to students from the wealthiest families also highlight the key problem of inequality in educational opportunities. The participants' views on the need for a more transparent and fair system for granting scholarships should promote educational equity.

In addition to this, students' experiences and decisions were contingent on the level of education and availability of educational facilities in rural regions. The lack of diverse and quality education created barriers for students in their pursuit of education, particularly in the selection of courses to undertake. One of the discussed issues was the need to provide additional funds for financing the development of rural education, including the construction of fully equipped science schools and career-oriented training centres. RSP20 had to say:

*"An educated society results from decentralisation of educational resources, strengthening of schools and improvement of educational parity in both urban and rural settings"*

*"Enhancing the selection process, our schools, and delivering more educational facilities to rural areas will be life-changing for us." [RSP4]*



Therefore, it can be concluded that the research highlights the complex nature of the barriers that rural students face in their quest to access university education. Mitigating these barriers requires an integration of structural, cultural, and economic approaches, as well as involving rural communities as key stakeholders. Furthermore, the PV activity conducted as part of this study served as a powerful tool for capturing visual representations of the importance of integrating structural, cultural, and economic approaches in rural Zimbabwean communities, as shown in Figure 1.



*The picture shows unevenness of the floor signifying that the path to higher tertiary education is not a smooth one. It is filled with unexpected turns and barriers that can make the journey difficult and unpredictable. The participants said the diverse floor tiles symbolise the different backgrounds, histories, and viewpoints of each student. This emphasises that opportunities for success can be created despite the barriers encountered in higher tertiary education. The mosaic floor, made up of individual tiles, represents possibility and hope. Every person has a unique journey, and the various situations they face shape their path, highlighting the importance of resilience and personal growth.*

**Figure 1:** *Different tiles on a floor - an allegory journey to higher tertiary education*

The PV activity provided visual representations of the importance of community support, with participants capturing images of community collaboration. Participants argued that the floor with its varied tiles symbolises the path to a university education, including its triumphs, setbacks, and variety of experiences. The tiles stand for achievements, adversity, and surprising twists. The different surfaces symbolise the uncertain journey towards higher education. Every tile enhances the overall mosaic, encouraging resilience and personal development. Education-related barriers foster perseverance, resilience, and the creation of a personal path. Through a combination of acceptance and perseverance, students can turn their educational experience into a compelling narrative of fortitude, development, and success.

## **5.2 Theme 2: Intergenerational connections and creating opportunities**

The voices of the participants brought the concepts of community support and social capital to life, providing tangible examples of how these factors shape the educational experiences of rural students. These first-hand encounters offered valuable insights into the crucial role that community support and social capital play in the educational journeys of rural students. The key findings that emerge from these verbatim quotes include the need for guidance and wisdom from community elders and significant others, education as a collective responsibility, and peer support and mentorship programmes. The first participant's experience highlights the significant impact that guidance from community elders can have on a young person's confidence and aspirations. The quote by RSP8:

*"When I was unsure about my future after high school, my significant others sat down with me and offered guidance. Their words of wisdom gave me the confidence to pursue my dreams of attending university."*

This emphasises the importance of having access to experienced mentors who can provide advice and encouragement during critical decision-making moments. Furthermore, the RSP2's observation was:

*"In our village, education is seen as a collective responsibility. Parents, teachers, significant others and community leaders all play a role in nurturing the academic aspirations of rural students. It's this sense of community support that motivates us to strive for excellence."*

This emphasises the collaborative nature of education in rural communities. The involvement of these significant others in nurturing academic aspirations creates a supportive system that motivates rural students to excel. This sense of shared responsibility fosters a strong feeling of belonging and purpose among rural students.

Additionally, another participant's experience with study groups and mentorship programmes highlights the value of peer support and guidance from individuals who have navigated similar barriers. The quote by RSP5:

*"Being part of study groups and mentorship programmes organised by our community has been valuable. Not only do we learn from each other, but we also receive guidance from older students and professionals who have walked the same path before us."*

This illustrates the power of shared experiences and the transfer of knowledge within the community.



*In this picture, we see a car stuck in the mud. The process of overcoming the muddy road can also be seen as a learning opportunity, teaching valuable lessons about perseverance, teamwork, and strategic thinking. Similarly, the barriers faced by us rural students can serve as important learning experiences. These difficulties can teach us about time management, setting priorities, and the importance of education. We should reflect on opportunities to get out of this muddy situation ourselves. We should articulate how our struggles have contributed to our personal and academic growth, reinforcing the idea that overcoming obstacles can lead to significant opportunities.*

**Figure 2:** *Learning and growth opportunities*

The above picture has a key message of conveying that the chances of Zimbabwean rural students accessing higher tertiary education are like a car that has been trapped by a muddy road. The gripping of barriers increases determination, innovation, and teamwork—factors essential in achieving academic success. The latter involves critical thinking, collaboration, problem-solving, and innovation, which are instrumental in higher tertiary education. Dealing with the barriers also gives the participants an opportunity to experience what it means to endure, collaborate, and plan. It also results in other positive effects such as an empowered status and forcing educational bodies to offer quality education and adequate facilities.

These findings provide compelling evidence of the positive impact that community support and social capital have on rural students' educational journeys. They showcase the nurturing environment, collective responsibility, and mentorship opportunities that exist within rural communities. Thus, the importance of leveraging and strengthening community support systems to empower rural students can help them overcome barriers to educational success.

### **5.3 Theme 3: Leveraging existing networks to cultivate a supportive environment**

The recommendations for harnessing community support and mentorship to empower rural students' higher education aspirations are grounded in the findings of this study, which highlighted

the pivotal role of these factors in shaping students' educational trajectories. These recommendations aim to leverage existing community resources and networks to create an enabling environment for rural students to effectively pursue their higher education aspirations. Participants in the FGD and PV activities provided insights that directly support these recommendations. RSP13 expressed:

*"We need mentorship programmes where successful individuals from our community can share their experiences and guide us in our educational journey."*

RSP11 emphasised the importance of community-led initiatives, stating:

*"Our community should come together to create a culture of learning and achievement that inspires us to aim higher."*

Furthermore, participants highlighted the need for strengthened partnerships between schools, community organisations, and higher education institutions. RSP14 noted:

*"Working together provides rural students with access to resources and support networks that will help them succeed in their educational pursuits."*

This sentiment was echoed by RSP6 who emphasised the importance of collaboration, stating:

*"Partnerships between different stakeholders can make a significant difference in the lives of rural students."*

The recommendation to utilise participatory research methods, such as PV, to amplify the voices and experiences of rural students aligns with the findings of this study. Participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share their perspectives through visual storytelling. RSP12 noted:

*"Photovoice allowed us to capture the essence of community support and mentorship in a way that words alone cannot express."*

Figure 3 shows how the participants expressed their opinion through a PV.



*The image of different battery cells, a phone charger, and a phone serves as a powerful metaphor for the journey to higher tertiary education. It illustrates that while we may have various resources at their disposal, it is "our" ability to effectively utilise these opportunities that determines "our" success. We should recognise and harness the available resources, as students we should keep our "phones" charged and functional, enabling us to achieve our educational goals and excel in life.*

**Figure 3:** *Different battery cells, a phone charger, and a phone - a metaphor for utilising resources in higher tertiary education.*

These photographs served as powerful reminders of the tangible support networks that exist within rural communities. Participants utilised photography to document various aspects of community life, including gatherings, mentorship sessions, and collaborative study groups, highlighting the support systems present in these communities. The image of several battery cells, a phone charger, and a phone represents the variety of tools and opportunities that students can use to further their education. When the batteries are fully charged, the phone serves as the ultimate symbol of achievement. To thrive in tertiary education, rural students need to make efficient use of these resources to identify and seize opportunities, accomplish objectives, and reach their full potential. This analogy emphasises the value of perseverance, flexibility, and the potential of every resource in achieving goals in life and education.

Additionally, monitoring and evaluating the use of existing networks to cultivate a supportive environment was suggested as a necessary multifaceted approach that captures both quantitative metrics and qualitative insights. Participants in the FGD provided valuable insights into how such monitoring and evaluation processes could be conducted. RSP17 emphasised the importance of regular assessments, stating:

*"We need to track the participation rates in mentorship programmes and community-led initiatives to gauge their impact over time."*

RSP3 highlighted the need for feedback mechanisms, saying:

*"It's essential to solicit feedback from students, mentors, and community members to understand what's working well and where improvements are needed."*

To effectively monitor and evaluate the leveraging of existing networks, RSP9 argued:

*"It's crucial to establish clear goals and objectives from the outset. These could include increasing participation rates in mentorship programmes, enhancing community engagement in educational initiatives, and improving students' access to resources and support networks."*

The setting of measurable targets allows stakeholders to track progress and make informed decisions about programmatic adjustments as needed. In conclusion, there is a need to prioritise community support and mentorship from stakeholders that create an enabling environment empowering rural students to overcome barriers and effectively pursue their higher tertiary education aspirations. Consequently, these recommendations, supported by insights from participants, emphasise the importance of leveraging existing community resources and partnerships to support the educational success of rural students.

## **6. Discussion of Findings**

The findings of this study on the barriers faced by rural students in accessing higher education resonate with existing literature on the subject while also offering new insights. According to Wu and Yuan (2022), cultural values and traditions play a significant role in shaping individuals' perceptions and aspirations regarding higher education. The findings in this study align with Chidakwa's (2020) research, which highlights the influence of familial expectations, gender roles, and traditional beliefs on educational outcomes in Zimbabwe. For instance, studies have shown how patriarchal norms can restrict girls' access to education, particularly in rural communities where traditional gender roles are more pronounced (Giovanis, 2021). While the study acknowledges these cultural barriers, it also emphasises the importance of culturally sensitive interventions, as these assist in understanding the needs of the community. This aligns with calls in the literature for education policies and programmes that are responsive to local cultural contexts (Nhundu, 2015).

Furthermore, the study identifies economic disparities as a major barrier to higher education for rural students, echoing existing research on the topic. According to Okeowhor et al. (2019) and Xiang and Stillwell (2023), economic barriers such as limited financial resources and the high costs of education are well-documented issues in Zimbabwe, exacerbated by the country's economic downturns and high levels of poverty. The call for targeted financial assistance and infrastructure development reflects recommendations put forth by scholars and policymakers alike. Additionally, Azano and Callahan (2021) found that the emphasis on resource mobilisation underscores the need for innovative financing mechanisms to support rural students' access to higher education.

Above all, the quality and availability of educational institutions in rural areas are crucial factors influencing students' educational choices and experiences, a point supported by the findings of this study. Existing literature has documented the disparities in educational infrastructure between urban and rural communities in Zimbabwe (Dube & Moyo, 2023; Hlatywayo, 2018), with rural schools often facing resource constraints and inadequate facilities (Corbett, 2021; Madani, 2019;

Nhundu, 2015). This highlights the need for investments in rural education infrastructure and the decentralisation of educational resources to align with broader efforts to promote educational equity and improve access to higher tertiary education in rural communities, as suggested by Mwoma and Chege (2021). The study therefore underscores the need for holistic interventions that address multiple dimensions of inequality and empower rural communities to overcome these barriers. Moreover, it emphasises the importance of centring the voices and perspectives of rural students and communities in the design and implementation of education policies and programmes, ensuring that interventions are relevant, inclusive, and effective in fostering equitable access to higher tertiary education.

The findings from the study on intergenerational connections and creating opportunities for rural Zimbabwean students offer insightful perspectives on the role of 'community support' and 'social capital' in shaping educational experiences. These insights align closely with existing literature on education and community dynamics in Zimbabwe (Azano & Callahan, 2021; Wu & Yuan, 2022). The study emphasises the crucial role of community support networks, echoing broader discussions about the significance of social capital in rural areas (Chidakwa, 2020; Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2022). The emphasis placed on guidance from elders and significant others, collective responsibility for education, and peer mentorship programmes resonates with Zimbabwean societal values prioritising communal collaboration and mutual support.

Moreover, the study highlights the influence of intergenerational connections on educational journeys, particularly the guidance and wisdom provided by community elders. This finding is consistent with existing literature discussing the pivotal role of elders in society as repositories of knowledge and cultural heritage (Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2022; Wu & Yuan, 2022). Additionally, the value of peer support and mentorship programmes identified in the study aligns with broader discussions on the importance of peer learning and social support networks in enhancing educational outcomes (Mlambo-Ngcuka & Mavuso, 2018). The utilisation of PV methodology adds a unique dimension to the study by allowing participants to visually capture their experiences of community support. While literature specifically on PV in the Zimbabwean context may be limited (Wu & Yuan, 2022), similar participatory approaches have been implemented globally to empower participants to document their perspectives. The photographs taken by participants serve as tangible evidence of the supportive relationships and networks within rural communities, reinforcing the intergenerational connections in educational journeys.

Furthermore, this study identified mentorship programmes, where community leaders and significant others share their experiences, as crucial for fostering educational achievement. Research shows that mentorship can significantly influence students' aspirations, confidence, and perseverance, especially in contexts with limited educational resources (Azano & Callahan, 2021; Mgqwashu et al., 2020; Trahar et al., 2020). According to Chidakwa and Hlalele (2022), communities can provide valuable guidance and motivation, reinforcing the concept of 'social capital' in rural communities by connecting students with mentors who have faced similar successes or barriers. The call for community-led initiatives to create a culture of learning and achievement emphasises the role of collective action in fostering educational success. This aligns with the communal values in rural Zimbabwean communities, where education is viewed as a shared responsibility. Community-led initiatives can build a supportive ecosystem that encourages academic excellence and resilience among students (Corbett, 2021).

The study's recommendation for strengthened partnerships between schools, community organisations, and higher education institutions aligns with existing research advocating for a collaborative approach to educational development (Lunga & Chidakwa, 2023). According to Chidakwa (2020) and Chidakwa and Hlalele (2022), partnerships can pool resources, expertise, and support networks, thereby enhancing the educational opportunities available to rural students.

Literature on educational policy in Zimbabwe often calls for multi-stakeholder engagement to address systemic barriers and promote educational equity (Tarusikirwa & Mafa, 2017). Thus, stakeholders can create more comprehensive and sustainable support systems for students by fostering collaboration. The study's emphasis on monitoring and evaluating the impact of community support and mentorship programmes is crucial for ensuring their effectiveness. Regular assessments and feedback mechanisms can help identify strengths and areas for improvement, ensuring that initiatives are responsive to the needs of students and communities (White & Downey, 2021; Wu & Yuan, 2022). This aligns with best practices in educational programme evaluation, which advocate for a mix of quantitative and qualitative metrics to capture the full impact of interventions.

Above all, the study emphasises the importance of leveraging community support systems to empower rural students and address barriers to educational success (Chidakwa, 2020; Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2022; Lunga & Chidakwa, 2023). This aligns with broader discussions on the need for community-driven approaches to education policy and practice in Zimbabwe. Azano and Callahan (2021) and Broadbent et al. (2021) assert that policymakers and educators can draw from these findings to develop interventions that strengthen community support networks, foster intergenerational connections, and promote peer mentorship programmes in rural schools and communities. It highlights the necessity for holistic approaches that recognise and harness the strengths of rural communities in overcoming barriers to educational success (Trahar et al., 2020; White & Downey, 2021). These recommendations for policy revision underscore the pivotal role of community involvement, mentorship, and partnerships in shaping students' educational trajectories and addressing barriers to higher education.

## **7. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Conclusively, although rural students face a number of barriers in attaining higher tertiary education, this study highlights the importance of community support, mentorship, and partnerships in shaping students' educational trajectories and addressing barriers to higher tertiary education in rural Zimbabwe. The study emphasises the need for local resources, collaborative partnerships, and student empowerment through participatory research methods. It emphasises the role of mentorship programmes, community-led initiatives, and strengthened partnerships. Regular monitoring and evaluation are crucial for ensuring responsiveness to student needs. The study fosters a supportive environment for rural students in Zimbabwe as a significant contribution to the field of educational development. Thus, stakeholders can create a more equitable educational ecosystem that supports rural students' aspirations and academic success through the implementation of these recommendations and regular monitoring of their impact. Overall, the study highlights the need for a holistic, community-driven approach to Zimbabwean educational development, ensuring all students have access to the support and opportunities they need, regardless of their background status.

Based on the comprehensive analysis, this study provides the following targeted recommendations. There is a need to:

- Create transparent, equitable scholarship programmes for rural students that involve community elders in scholarship design and selection.
- Invest in rural education infrastructure, allocating resources for rural educational facilities. This can improve the quality and diversity of educational offerings.
- Create multi-stakeholder partnerships by fostering collaborative networks between schools, community organisations, and higher tertiary education institutions.
- Implement comprehensive monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to develop robust assessment frameworks and regular feedback channels.

- Design financial support and resource mobilisation strategies that establish targeted financial assistance programmes for rural students. This can be achieved through developing innovative financing mechanisms for higher tertiary education.

## 8. Declarations

**Funding:** The author declares that this study received financial support from Political Economy of Education Research Network funding, which was allocated by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Grant Reference AH/T008075/1.

**Acknowledgement:** I extend my gratitude to the research assistants and the participants themselves, who played a big role in assisting in gathering the data used in this study. Your cooperation in making this research possible is greatly appreciated.

**Conflict of interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Data availability:** The data is not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with participants and ethical restrictions imposed by the Institutional Review Board. However, de-identified data can be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to approval by the ethics committee.

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